

CONFIDENCE-BUILDING GUIDE: RESOURCE 9

Why Fear Prevents Students from Meeting Standards

If every student is going to have the chance of learning to lead, then it is essential that students master standards for speaking and listening.



Communication is a skill to develop (not an innate trait) and one that employers and colleges alike are valuing among the most desired qualities in potential candidates. While fear and anxiety may seem like something that each individual student has to overcome on his or her own, classrooms have to be places where students can face their fears and develop this skill.

The Common Core English Language Arts Standards include a set of College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening, broken down by grades K through 12. Specific components of the Speaking & Listening Strand are divided into skills associated with the “Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas” and “Comprehension and Collaboration”. There are elements of the standards that rely on understanding of the material or the ability to integrate multimedia, which do not depend on a student’s

confidence to express his or her ideas. Unfortunately, when it comes to developing the actual skill of communication, fear can become a barrier to the experiences necessary to practice and improve.

Fear and the Presentation Standards

Possessing the courage to present your ideas and questions is a gatekeeper to developing communication skills. Beginning in Kindergarten, one of the central standards is to “ask and answer questions in order to seek help, get information, or clarify something that is not understood.” When students are too nervous to speak in the first place, it becomes impossible for them to advocate for themselves or express their questions. In the case of presentation, a first-grade standard is to publicly “describe people, places, things, and events with relevant details, expressing ideas and feelings clearly.” Once again, fear can paralyze students and prevent them from giving a presentation, even if they are able to meet these standards in the context of written expression.

Throughout all grades, the Speaking & Listening Standards emphasize the ability to be clear, adapt to audiences, and recount stories and experiences, which all depend on practice getting up in front of an audience. Unfortunately, it is hard to practice when you are someone who feels uncomfortable voicing personal experiences, making it even scarier to meet a standard like the fourth-grade requirement to “tell a story or recount an experience in an organized manner.” Beyond the content itself, fear can also become an obstacle to practicing and demonstrating oral delivery skills. Standards across grade levels require students to master eye contact, volume, pace, and pronunciation, all of which can be directly affected by nerves and anxiety.

Fear and the Comprehension and Collaboration Standards

Fear can also interfere with a teacher’s ability to assess whether a student comprehends the academic material. Even when a student comes to a discussion prepared, it can be difficult to “stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas” when he or she is distracted by the fear of judgment or making a mistake in front of peers. This is especially the case with debates, where having to “present points of agreement and disagreement” or “identify insufficient evidence” requires a student to feel confident in their speaking abilities and secure enough in their ideas to be able to

take a stand. While strong teamwork, preparation, and research can go a long way to building this confidence, it is not enough in the face of public speaking anxiety.

The bulk of the communication skills outlined in the Common Core Standards revolve around the development of spontaneous speaking skills, where students have limited preparation time to form their ideas. Given that most speaking that takes place in classrooms is spontaneous and on-the-spot, the inability to ever feel truly prepared only heightens the fear of public speaking. Standards such as “challenging ideas and conclusions”, “posing and responding to questions”, “asking for clarification”, or “linking to comments by others” all involve being able to formulate and organize ideas immediately. For some students, spontaneous speaking comes naturally and can even be fun; for others, the prospect is terrifying.

Helping Everyone Face Their Fears

Framing the standards in the context of fears highlights the support needed when teachers translate standards into classroom activities and assessments. Rather than relying on the skills and experiences that students already bring to discussions and presentations, it is important to treat communication skills as something that must be taught to everyone. Too often, student fears around public speaking are left to emerge in high-stakes situations, like final presentations or debates, where some students shine because they happen to have access to public speaking experience or role models. Instead, students also need to know that communication is something to practice and develop over time with guidance and instruction, just like any other academic skill. Classrooms must be places where students can face their fears and access the material, if they are ever to be truly inclusive learning environments.

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